



# Author's Reply to Review of Histories of Violence

## Citation

Pinker, Steven. 2012. "Author's Reply to Review of Histories of Violence." Reviews in History, Review No. 1232, December 4, 2012.

## Published Version

<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1232>

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:13602862>

## Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Ziemann should be more careful about slinging around trash talk like “mechanical,” “one-directional,” “shallow,” “unconvincing,” “naïve,” “simplistic,” and “superficial,” because these are rhetorical guns which can be turned around. He is clearly offended that *Better Angels* is not a conventional history of the kind he is used to, but combines traditional history with quantitative data and scientific research on human motives. His glib dismissals should have been, in his words, “more thorough, nuanced, and historically informed.”

1. Ziemann questions my favorable invocation of Norbert Elias's use of Freud's theory of ego strength, according to which there is a neurobiological system for self-control which can inhibit anti-social impulses and which can be strengthened with use. He failed to notice that *Better Angels* explicitly takes up the scientific status of this hypothesis in a lengthy section on the science of self-control, which reviews evidence that on this matter, Freud and Elias were correct.

2. He makes a conceptual error in claiming that declining rates of violence (on a per-capita basis) are a “statistical artifact” because of the “exponential growth in world population during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” If a population grows exponentially, so does the potential number of murderers and despots and conquerors and rapists and muggers and sadists. If the absolute number of victims of violence stays the same, while the proportion decreases, something must have changed to allow all those extra people to grow up free of violence. In any case, with many of the phenomena I discuss, such as the decline in war deaths since 1945, the criticism is moot, since the declines are seen in absolute numbers as well as in rates.

3. As an example of my “mechanical, one-dimensional argument devoid of systematic historical context” Ziemann argues that *All Quiet on the Western Front* was misinterpreted by one critic (Ziemann provides no citation) as “war propaganda,” presumably because the critic misunderstood Remarque's ironic depictions of the seductions of war to foolish young men. Yes, I could have added several pages of such “historical context” to the discussion (in the same way that I could have added several pages of context to every point mentioned), but what would be the point? It would have been a useless digression from the historical development I was describing, and which Ziemann does not contest: that anti-war themes became prominent in Western popular and elite culture in the 1920s and 1930s.

4. Ziemann repeatedly blows off analyses he does not care for with a single word (“dubious,” “unconvincing,” and so on), without offering a shred of counterargument. This includes a ten-page analysis of the nuclear peace theory, a seventeen-page review of statistical analyses of the economic and political predictors of militarized disputes, and extensive discussions of the role of individual agency in the perpetration of wars and genocides.

5. “Yet experts in pre-historic archaeology have noted that archaeological evidence – compared to data derived from ethnographic observation – suggests ‘much less violent’ societies...”. The “experts” Ziemann cite consist of one man: the notorious ideologue Brian Ferguson (who, incidentally, is not an archaeologist). *Better Angels* shows that estimates of violence from archaeological and ethnographic sources are remarkably consistent with each other, and reviews evidence that violence in our lineage extends far earlier than the late Neolithic.

6. “Historians have shown in quite some detail that the use of primary evidence by Norbert Elias.. was naïve and utterly misleading by the standards of historical knowledge already achieved by the 1930s.” Again confusing the singular with the plural, Ziemann cites a single historian who has made this accusation—and another one who argues the opposite. The extensive data I present from historical criminologists show that Elias was correct in identifying a decline in personal violence from the Middle Ages to the modern period. Most medieval historians consider this claim unexceptionable.

7. Ziemann is correct to note that my comparisons of the death rates of the two world wars with those of mass killings in preceding centuries is necessarily imprecise and inconclusive. Yet this champion of “context” and “nuance” fails to mention the context of that discussion: an evaluation of the common belief that “the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the most violent in history,” which of course is problematic in exactly the same ways, despite being repeated to the point of cliché.

8. "Any proper explanation of the decline in violence in recent times has to give due attention to both peace-keeping and peace-building, two topics which receive virtually no attention by Pinker." The growth and success of peacekeeping are discussed (with graphs and data) on pp. 313-316. The psychology and effectiveness of peace-building measures are discussed (with graphs and data) on pp. 543-547.

9. Ziemann confesses that he is "not a psychologist" and hence unequipped to evaluate the two chapters on the psychology and neurobiology of violent and peaceful motives. Had he shown the least curiosity about scholarship outside of his disciplinary silo he would have learned that psychological research, far from being "of limited explanatory value," has provided enormous insight into the phenomena he mentions. This includes the commonplace that "violence is the result of a social relation, mainly between the perpetrator and the victim, but often including bystanders as a third party," and the distinction between "short-lived violent encounters, ... organised violence such as in the military or organised crime, and the general level of violence in a given society." Each of these is analysed extensively in those chapters.

Ziemann reveals his core conviction when he invokes the hoary Durkheimian dogma that there are pristine "social facts" in which the "psychological motivations of the people involved often disappear or become largely irrelevant." This excuse for academic insularity, never convincing in the first place, is becoming increasingly archaic in an era in which scholars are integrating knowledge at multiple levels of analysis. Historians would be ill-advised to cling to it.